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Reading reflection 1
Week of Oct. 5
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PA663 – Skene-Pratt

The more I learn about the rights of nonprofits to advocate on policy issues and the true motives of politicians to pass policies that will get them reelected, the more I realize how important it is for nonprofit organizations and NPO executive directors, board members, volunteers and other advocates to be actively involved in nonpartisan voter engagement – whether that means hosting candidate forums, driving the elderly and those who lack transportation to the polls, or disseminating general voter education awareness materials to neighborhoods and communities with low voter turnout.

While increasing my frustration level over our current political system and elected officials, this class also has invigorated me to speak out for the voiceless, underprivileged and underrepresented populations. The Oct. 5 week's readings on Nonprofits, Elections and Nonpartisan Voter Engagement explains the importance of the nonprofit sector as a "sleeping giant" in regards to their role in nonpartisan voter engagement. Since many nonprofits provide social, human and medical services to the needy and poor and are located in urban and impoverished areas, NPO advocates and employees are on the front lines when it comes to knowing what the issues are and getting these disenfranchised populations to vote. They have the access and ability to gain the trust of lower socioeconomic and under or uneducated classes of people and explain to them their duty and right to take part in America's political system. As it says in the introduction to the "Nonprofits Voting and Elections: A Guide to Nonpartisan Voter Participation and Education" article on page 2, "Nonprofit organizations, as much as any other type of organization, have the credibility and respect necessary to reach out to discouraged or disengaged voters or people new to voting and politics." Albeit cliché, the saying "Knowledge is power" is true. So are numbers when it comes to America's political and voting process.

I believe this is a big part of the reason our country has become controlled by a minority of rich and politically powerful people – because they know older, more conservative people who have higher education levels and incomes tend to be the most faithful block of voters. This is also why I believe our country continues to elect the same types of people to office – look at Michigan's Governor, House and Senate all being controlled by mostly white, male, rich and business-minded Republicans – and pass policies that benefit the constituents who voted them in. As I shared in my reading notes for the week of Oct. 5, the nonprofit sector has a huge reach and an advantage when it comes to educating and engaging the groups who typically do not vote for a variety of reasons:

- The sheer size of the sector. There are more than 1 million community-based nonprofit organizations and sites are often located in areas with a past history of lower voter participation.
- The sector also employs 14 million people and utilizes 50 million volunteers annually. They are usually passionate and dedicated to changing their communities for the better and helping under-served populations in urban, rural and impoverished areas.
- People trust nonprofits, especially local ones in their communities, and day to day contacts at points of service provide good opportunities for voter engagement. That can be reminding people to vote, helping them find their poll and getting them there, hosting a candidate forum or providing information about an upcoming election.
- There is no limit on how much voter education and activity an NPO can do other than ballot measures. The IRS treats ballot measures as a "lobbying activity," subject to lobbying rules. A

nonprofit can spend as much as it wants on voter education and encouraging people to vote so long as it remains “nonpartisan” and does not support or oppose a candidate for elected office.

- The following are allowed: register people to vote, distribute nonpartisan materials on candidates or ballot measures, sponsor nonpartisan candidate forums or debates, help new voters understand elections and the voting process, provide briefings to all candidates on the organization’s issues, and encourage and help people get to the polls on Election Day.
- What they cannot do: Endorse candidates for office, contribute money to candidates, let candidates use office space, equipment, mailing lists or other resources, rate candidates or publicize which candidates share the organization’s view on contested issues.

Besides feeling overworked and overwhelmed with day-to-day operational issues and direct client services, I think many people who work in the nonprofit sector are unaware of the rights they have when it comes to political activism and voter engagement. However, those who choose to go into nonprofit work – especially in the human services and health care subsectors – are usually passionate about the mission of their organizations and social activism. They are dedicated to exploring the cause of large, complex social problems and helping the clients they serve become self-sufficient and better citizens. It is hard work, fraught with sad stories, sob stories, frustration, funding shortfalls and often bureaucratic red tape. But it is also rewarding work and worth the time and effort to encourage and assist people in exercising their right to vote and speak on policy issues at the polls. To quote the introduction of “A Nonprofit Participation Starter Kit” on page 2:

“Active voter participation builds healthier communities. People who vote are more likely to volunteer, advocate or be active locally in other civic ways. Elected officials are more likely to respond to the needs and concerns of those neighborhoods that turn out on Election Day. They are also more responsive to those agencies and organizations that promote voting. Democracy is something we can’t take for granted. It needs our help. Our communities are more likely to thrive when we participate at higher rates. Voting is a way of connecting to and caring about our neighborhoods, our government and the direction of public policy.”

I could not have said it better myself and am starting to think our very Democracy and the future of America depends on it. Freedom is no free ride. Each of us must do our part to keep those we elect accountable.